

Sage Handbook of Social Media

'Ethnography'

Jolynna Sinanan and Tom McDonald

Among a range of established social science research methods, ethnography claims distinctiveness by virtue of its commitment to achieving an especially deep engagement with participants through close observation of, and participation in, their social lives. Ethnography is the primary research method and methodology of anthropology, but ethnographically-informed approaches are used across a wide range of disciplines in contemporary scholarship, including those engaged with social media research. This chapter will examine the role that ethnography can play in understanding social media's impact upon social life, demonstrating ethnography's aptness for discovering new types of socialities and relationships that are made possible by social media. We will also discuss whether the migration of ethnographic methodologies to other disciplines (hastened as researchers across a broad range of fields grapple with understanding social media in the context of everyday action) poses a threat to the distinctiveness of anthropology itself.

Sanjek (2010) notes that ethnography has a distinctively dual nature, being both the main practice (undertaking fieldwork and participant observation) and product (in terms of ethnographic writing such as monographs and articles) of anthropological research. Therefore, rather than limiting our scope to ethnography as a tool for better understanding social media, this chapter will also examine how social media is changing ethnography. We demonstrate that the increasing ubiquity of social media in societies throughout the world not only constitutes a new focus of comparative ethnographic research, but is also profoundly reshaping how ethnographic research is conducted. This chapter does not provide readers with a 'how-to' guide for performing ethnography on social media, but argues that ethnography and social media should be considered as two sets of practices and artefacts that are themselves undergoing constant change and development, and are set on a course which will involve them becoming increasingly bound in interaction with each other, with important implications for how social research is conducted more broadly.

This chapter is divided into two parts. First, we examine ethnography as a practice and second, as a product. In both instances, we give a concise summary of the literature that has informed the development of that aspect of ethnography, before considering relevant recent scholarship on researching social media through ethnography (largely from within the

emerging subfield of digital anthropology, but also considering its adoption by a range of cross-disciplinary scholars), placing this in context to other approaches to studying social media. We also draw on our own research from the *Why We Post* project¹, conducted through University College London.² This study presented a unique opportunity to research social media ethnographically, involving nine anthropologists spread over eight countries.³ Eight of the researchers lived for 15 months in towns with relatively small populations (18,000 – 25,000 people) in Brazil, Chile, North and South China, India, Italy, Trinidad and Turkey, and one lived close to his field site in England, across 2012 – 2014. The result was an in depth, comparative study of the uses of social media (Miller et al., 2016) based on nine closely integrated ethnographies (Costa, 2016; Haynes, 2016; McDonald, 2016; Miller, 2016; Nicolescu, 2016; Sinanan, forthcoming; Spyer, forthcoming; Venkatraman, forthcoming; Wang, 2016). This chapter calls on some of our own practical experiences participating in the study, in addition to other recent scholarship that addresses this issue.

The chapter closes with a discussion of how social media brings the practice and product of ethnography together in a closer relationship. Although for the purposes of organising this chapter we have chosen to maintain this split between ethnography-as-practice and ethnography-as-product, in reality these two aspects have always influenced each other: decisions made on which ethnographic approach to adopt will inevitably dictate the nature of the final ethnographic product. Further, the presence of social media is progressively blurring the boundaries between these two aspects of ethnography. We argue that the future of anthropology as a discipline may be better safeguarded by embracing the opportunities offered by technologies such as social media in reshaping both ethnographic practice and product to better fit the contemporary world, rather than attempting to defensively confine ethnography within anthropology's disciplinary boundaries.

Social media and ethnographic process

It is the process, or method of ethnography where social media is arguably having the most noticeable and most discussed effects on how anthropologists go about their research. Postill & Pink (2012) helpfully identify three particular challenges created by the growth of social media, which will form the focus of this section:

¹ <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post>

² This project was funded by the European Research Council (Grant number SOcNET Project 2011-AdG-295486).

³ China had two field sites, to account for the specificity of the country's distinctive social media platforms.

They [social media] create new sites for ethnographic fieldwork, foster new types of ethnographic practice, and invite critical perspectives on the theoretical frames that dominate internet studies, thus providing opportunities for re-thinking internet research methodologically. (Postill & Pink, 2012: 214)

In response to Postill & Pink's first challenge, we find that social media represents not only a new location for fieldwork, but is also increasingly becoming the explicit topic of anthropological research (see for example Miller 2011, boyd 2014, Postill 2013, Miller et al. 2016). Such studies have precipitated a range of ethnographic insights on a wide variety of themes. They have made scholarly impacts by placing the global phenomena of social media within local contexts, and understanding how it is appropriated differently in different locales (Miller et al., 2016); highlighting the reciprocity that underlies social media use (Miller, 2011); showing the divisions between parents and children with regard to social media use, and how parents often make the situation worse (boyd, 2014); documenting how people with disabilities develop their own social media practices to enable self-representation (Ginsburg, 2012) and detailing how user's selfhood can emerge through the configuration and reordering of online spaces (Horst, 2009).

With regard to Postill & Pink's (2012) assertion that social media creates new types of ethnographic practice, we note that for the majority of anthropological researchers, social media is not their explicit focus of research; rather, these communication technologies increasingly impinge upon their own research topics by virtue of the fact that their participants make extensive use of many of these platforms. As a result, themes which are central anthropological concerns – including religion, politics, gender and kinship – are enacted on (or through the use of) these platforms. This carries important implications for all researchers carrying out ethnography, including those not explicitly focussed on social media use. The ubiquity of these platforms in participants' lives necessitates that ethnographers should be proficient in conducting research on, about and around social media. The following review section will demonstrate that the literature regarding the practice of internet ethnography (rather than social media specifically) is relatively well developed and ever-expanding, albeit dominated by reflexive discussions of how to carry out research online.

Hine's *Virtual Ethnography* argues that attitudes towards the internet have important repercussions for the ways it is used or how individuals relate to it, once these beliefs are understood within broader cultural contexts (2000: 8). She sees the internet as a product of culture, and ethnography as a mode of engaging with practices within such contexts. This,

she posits, is invaluable for deriving comparative understandings of how the internet connotes different cultural meanings to different people (2000: 29). However, Hine also asserts that internet ethnography does not necessarily involve physical immersion into a particular geographic location. Rather, internet ethnography is more concerned with experiential immersion into particular social spaces of the internet, where, similar to more traditional forms of ethnography, researchers negotiate access, observe different interactions and interact with participants themselves (2000: 45, 46). Hine later develops these ideas fully by challenging previous distinctions of immaterial 'virtual' space in opposition to material 'physical' space, claiming the internet is increasingly embedded, embodied, and everyday (2015: 55). This leads Hine to call for an autoethnographic approach to as the most apt way to engage with the mundane, unbounded and ubiquitous nature of the internet.

In *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, Miller and Slater agree that uses of the internet are only meaningful when situated in particular places and wider generalisations about patterns of usage are better grounded within comparative ethnography (2000). However, their ethnography differs in approach from Hine in the emphasis they afford to 'grounded' offline fieldwork. Based on research conducted in Trinidad and building on Miller's long-term engagement with the island, Miller and Slater conclude that the internet is a 'Trinidadian place' and refute the terms online, virtual and cyber when used to suggest the internet is a place separate from any physical one (2000:4). Long-term involvement with individuals allowed the researchers to contextualise people's internet usage within other aspects of their social lives, which Miller and Slater argue is critical to understanding what the internet is and means in Trinidad (2000: 21).

Treating the internet as an immersive space in which to conduct field work perhaps best culminates in Tom Boellstorff's (2008) study on SecondLife, where he uses a traditional ethnographic approach, albeit while treating the online 'synthetic' world of SecondLife as his field site. Creating an avatar called Tom Bukowski and a home called Ethnographia, Boellstorff observes, participates and interacts with others, using his own avatar as a means to research the social world of SecondLife and the behaviours of those who inhabit it. One of the most significant contributions of the volume is Boellstorff's attempt to collapse the distinction between the 'virtual' and the 'real': he argues that the virtual should rather be thought of as an extension of the 'real' (through the flow of culture across on and offline domains), and that our 'real' lives have, in fact, been 'virtual' all along (2008: 5).

In a similar vein, working from the assumption that digital spaces take their cue from their non-digital counterparts, Horst's study of teenagers and the social network site MySpace concludes that personal pages are far less about asserting individualism, but how 'individuals exist in alignment with highly socialized media of expression' (2009: 99). Drawing on a material culture approach, Horst uses digital platforms to explore the relationship between places, persons and objects (2009). By visiting teenage users in their homes and seeing their most private spaces—their bedrooms—Horst concludes that Facebook and MySpace are digital spaces that affirm physical and material relationships, tastes and values (2009: 108).

Responding to the proliferation of ethnographic studies in the mid-2000s, Coleman gives an excellent review on ethnographic approaches to digital media (non-analogue technologies, mobile phones, internet and software apps but not social media in particular), in which she identifies interlinked and overlapping categories of scholarship (2010). Studies of the cultural politics of digital media examine 'how cultural identities, representation and imaginaries, for example, youth, diaspora, nation or indigeneity are remade, subverted, communicated and circulated through individual and collective engagement with technologies' (2010: 488). Coleman highlights how vernacular cultures of digital media typically focus on more incongruent phenomena, such as particular genres or groups, hackers, blogging, memes, migrant programmers and logics around properties of such media. She describes the 'prosaics' (or more mundane aspects) of digital media as how media is integrated into, reflects or shapes other kinds of practices such as economic exchange, finance or religious worship. Coleman historicises the studies she reviews within shifting theoretical trends, such as the anthropological concern with the impact of globalisation on localities and the emerging network society and concludes that ethnography contributes to better understanding digital media in relation to history, context and lived experience (2010: 488-489).

The relationships between politics and social media (or previously, social networking sites) have also been given considerable attention to contextualise how digital activism and organisation has translated into physical activism and protest. Adopting a similar approach to Coleman, Postill highlights how contemporary trends in anthropology often conceptualise the 'global' in a way that is seen to encroach on the stationary, bounded spaces of the 'local' (2013: 414). He argues that social life understood ethnographically cannot simply be reduced to a community-versus-network binary, instead advocating for the use of ethnographic research to add depth and complexity to the theoretical debates surrounding

concepts of community and network societies. Ethnographic studies of communities are not always best served by prolonged engagement in a single, clearly bounded field site: Tufekci and Wilson's (2012) ethnographic study of protest ecologies illustrates how following a protest movement within a physical context is far more challenging than analysing online political participation. They challenge the assumption that social media can contribute to resisting authoritarian regimes by emphasising that there are few accounts of how social media (or the internet more broadly) is used by protestors as events unfold in real time (2012: 363). Their study uses ethnographic methods in the aftermath of the 2011 Tahrir Square protests in Egypt to observe the protest's ecology and gain insider knowledge from participants; however, they note that encounters with participants, which occurred in semi-controlled public spaces such as cafes and parks around Tahrir Square, were characterised by anxiety, fear and panic. The main contribution of Tufekci and Wilson's study is to demonstrate how media ecologies during the protest movement reconfigured certain social relations from face-to-face conversations to social media chats, which rapidly accelerated the speed of the movement's social actions.

A number of scholars have speculated on different factors that may contribute to a social movement's success online. In his study of the Spanish 'indignados' political organisation, Postill coins the term 'media epidemiography' to explain how the movement suddenly gained momentum (2013). He observed the protest directly in Barcelona, as well as following the techno-political context over Twitter and concludes that throughout the movement, activists showed 'selective uses of viral and non-viral contents both on and offline' (2013: 14). In a complimentary study, Lim examines the relationship between users and social media for activism (2013: 646). Based on interviews and analyses of blog posts, Lim draws on her prior in-depth knowledge of the Indonesian social and historical context to identify the conditions where social media might lead to successful forms of activism. She argues that social media activism is more likely to mobilise individuals if the narratives of the the cause are easy to understand, appeal to senses of nationalism and religiosity and invite low risk action (2013: 638).

In reviewing this body of literature, one can be forgiven for thinking that the reflexive discussion of *how* to carry out research online overtakes the desire to discover the actual use and transformation of digital platforms by research subjects, and the implications these have for how people understand their place in the world. Methodological reflections are clearly vital in strengthening critical engagement with regards to the validity and representativeness of research data, however, we are also keen to pair these discussions

with our own experiences of conducting ethnography. In the *Why We Post* project, we did not seek out overt political engagement or activism as a focus of research, for example. Instead, our approach to politics was to uncover how and in what forms political engagement occurs through observations of social media use and daily interactions in our field sites (Miller et al. 2016: 142). In this sense, our topics of study were primarily driven by participants' actions, rather than presumed objects of inquiry.

The above examples demonstrate the emergence of a number of key anthropologists who have been influential in using ethnographic methods to understand social media, and in so doing establish the subfield of digital anthropology. A further key development has been the migration of ethnographic methods from the confines of the anthropological discipline and towards a broad range of scholars in fields such as human-computer interaction, media, communication and cultural studies. The result of this dispersion of ethnographic method into many sub disciplines has been a wide body of exemplary ethnographic publications that have greatly enriched our understanding of the impact of social media (and other ICT use) across a wide range of platforms and cultural settings. Examples include Baym's (1994) study of Usenet groups; Burrell's (2012) ethnography of Ghanaian internet cafes; Coleman's (2012) account of Debian hackers and Kelty's (2008) study of open-source software to name but a few. We, as authors of the current chapter, find this dispersion of the ethnographic approach particularly of interest given that our own personal trajectories have been very grounded within this central group of digital anthropologists (Sinanan originally completed her PhD in Development Studies, but conducted her Postdoctoral research in the Anthropology Department at University College London before joining RMIT in Melbourne; while McDonald continuously trained as an anthropologist from undergraduate level). Our interest in the increasing adoption of ethnography in a wide range of disciplines lies not only in how data obtained through ethnographic methods is being used to address a range of questions beyond the traditional remit of conventional anthropological topics, but also how this poses something of an existential challenge to anthropology's claim to disciplinary distinctiveness.

Postill & Pink (2012) also advocate a shift in the methodological emphasis of research away from specific 'objects' of study (for example communities and social network models), instead calling for increased attention to various forms of action (such as routines, mobilities and socialities). They posit that focussing on everyday, lived action can inform theoretical understandings of digital media, while keeping such explanations firmly 'grounded' in the realities of everyday life. Polymedia (Madianou & Miller 2012, 2013) is an example of a

theory having emerged from ethnographic inquiry, and in this section, we will examine how polymedia applied to our own ethnographic findings.

Madianou argues that ethnography might be the only way to gain an in-depth understanding of how uses of social media are shaped by relational dynamics and context, and is thus essential for understanding the 'social' dimension of social media (2015). Along with Miller, Madianou coined the term 'polymedia' (2012, 2013), which recognises that people use different forms of communication (e.g., phone calls as opposed to text messages) or different platforms according to the relationship to the person they are communicating with.⁴ While Miller and Madianou concede that cost may still be a factor in accessing digital media, they nonetheless argue that social media use has undergone rapid expansion in developing countries such as Trinidad and the Philippines (Madianou and Miller 2013, Madianou, 2015) that have also seen a growth of low-cost communication technologies. Polymedia is particularly ethnographic in nature as the concept recognises how different communications media are situated within their wider media ecologies. The concept recognises how each medium finds its place with respect to other media (Horst et. al. 2010; Ito et al. 2010, Madianou and Miller, 2013; Slater and Tacchi, 2004), idioms of practice and media ideologies (Gershon, 2010).

One of the key differences between ethnographic approaches to studying social media and other methods such as surveys, questionnaires and content analysis is that the latter may become decontextualised from other forms of communication and lived relationships (Dwyer, Starr and Passerini, 2007, Acquisti and Gross, 2006, Carpenter, 2012, Junco, 2012). In the *Why We Post* project, our ethnographic approach involved not only living in our respective field sites for an extended period of time, but becoming involved in the lives of the people we studied. In some cases, this meant volunteering in a local kindergarten or school, assisting with cooking for an event or helping with everyday work, in order to make genuine friendships. The underlying idea is a commitment to 'holistic contextualisation', where one aspect of a person, such as social media use, is examined in respect to other parts of a person's life that they might experience, simultaneously (Miller et al. 2016: 28). We conducted formal interviews and questionnaires throughout the fieldwork, but most of the original insights came from spending extended periods of time with different people. Ideally, each researcher attempted to familiarise themselves with people from different social groups or geographical areas in their field site, so as to gain a more comprehensive knowledge of the place. Crucially, after identifying the most commonly used platforms in the site, each

⁴ Madianou and Miller (2013) argue that polymedia can be said to apply in any given situation so long as access to different kinds of digital media are not majorly constrained by cost and usability.

researcher aimed to befriend around 150 of their research participants on social media and follow their online activities, ideally for the entire course of the field work. This chapter now turns to discuss a detailed example of how this process of forming relationships in the field became understood through an ethnography of – and on – social media.

Relationships of trust to inform grounded theory

Sinanan discovered early in her field work in Trinidad that asking to befriend someone on Facebook after having just met is more common than asking for a phone number. As each researcher had created a dedicated social media account for research, Sinanan found that participants were initially sceptical of her and were uncomfortable with being added as a friend to a research profile. Once she had populated the profile with some images from her 'normal' life in Melbourne, posted updates, chatted with new contacts and liked and commented on posts by others, she found that becoming friends on Facebook worked alongside getting to know people in her field site. By the end of her fieldwork, she had accumulated 267 Facebook friends, all of whom she had met face-to-face, and chatted with 38 people on WhatsApp. Having several research participants as contacts on different social media platforms, as well as spending time with them on a regular basis, enabled Sinanan to illustrate how a theory of polymedia unfolds in context.

In Sinanan's research, polymedia was useful not only to account for how Trinidadians relate to each other, but as a way for Sinanan to understand how she should relate to participants. As a social theory of media that has been developed from ethnography and anthropological theory, polymedia occupies a niche that addresses the uses of media in the context of relationships. One of the implications of the combination of media is that communications allow for the control of emotions and power asymmetries in relationships (Madianou and Miller, 2012, Miller and Sinanan, 2014). Polymedia suggests that media helps constitute social relationships. The example of the Trinidadian idiom 'liming' below demonstrates how forms of sociality that existed prior to social media translate to WhatsApp. In the case of liming, a spirit of egalitarianism and inclusion is important, so WhatsApp's group chat function affords each member of the group to be a potentially equal participant in the conversation. The second significant contribution of polymedia as a theory is that it emphasizes content and *how* people also choose media to communicate particular messages, for example why breaking up with a partner would be more appropriately done face-to-face than by text message. As a social theory of media grounded within ethnographic inquiry, Miller and Madianou's concept of polymedia compliments theories of

relationships between media platforms proposed by a number of other scholars from a range of disciplines outside of anthropology, previously. Media multiplexity theory (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1998) and media ecologies (Fuller, 2005) are two notable examples. Polymedia may be distinctive in the way that it foregrounds the qualities of social relationships, which lends it to being used as a framework for making sense of ethnographic data.

There were clear implications and consequences for choosing which platform to communicate certain content to particular people. In Trinidad, the more dyadic nature of communication on WhatsApp made it more acceptable to conduct serious conversations over text on occasions where the other person was unable to speak owing to being in the company of others. Although a voice call, a video call, or face-to-face conversation was often described as being preferable to text, WhatsApp was viewed as a more acceptable text-based service for private and intimate conversations than Facebook Messenger. WhatsApp was also understood in relation to its predecessor, BBM (BlackBerry Messenger). BlackBerry was arguably the first multimedia form of communication over a hand held device for many Trinidadians, and when it declined in popularity Trinidadians were quick to adopt WhatsApp, which offered similar functions but could be used on many different brands of phones.

The configuration of media was also influenced by how participants viewed 'public' and 'private'. Over the duration of Sinanan's field work, she observed an increase in closed, small group chats between friends or family members on WhatsApp, which resonates with modes of socialising that were already widespread in Trinidadian society. The Trinidadian term 'liming' has a similar meaning to 'hanging out', but liming is considered integral to social life. Previously, liming was a predominantly male public activity, where men would lime in rum shops or on street corners, talking about politics and commenting on (or to) women passing by (Eriksen, 1990, Lieber, 1976). Today, men and women lime in both gendered and mixed groups, in homes, bars or more up-market clubs. On weekends, extended family or groups might lime at the beach or river. Several young men emphasised drinking as central to liming, but many enjoy liming for the sake of sharing company and relaxing without any impositions. Liming is also characterised by shows of bravado and performative banter for the entertainment of peers and was historically associated with street culture, which emphasizes style and appearance to enhance a person's reputation (Miller, 1994a, Burton, 1997). The importance placed on appearance as defining a person takes on specific cultural importance in Trinidad where individuals often emphasise character as residing on the surface of an individual rather than 'deep within' (Miller 1994b). In this context it is perhaps unsurprising that we found that people in the Trinidadian field site tend to post more images

to Facebook, with an average of 732 per person, than those in the English field site, for example, where the average is 450 per person.

Liming materialises through images of eating and drinking together or of empty alcohol bottles on Facebook, and it also appears through banter over WhatsApp. The importance of humour in Trinidad and the ability to make others laugh demonstrates a form of social inclusion achieved through sharing common references and experiences and reinforcing group norms as a form of everyday play (Eriksen, 1990, Lieber, 1976). Closed groups of extended family or friends on WhatsApp form a space where dynamics of liming are replicated through sharing banter, jokes, humorous memes and images from pop culture, and links to videos as a form of time spent together and bonding. One of the reasons for the greater popularity of group chats on WhatsApp compared to Facebook Messenger is because participants felt WhatsApp afforded them greater control over who saw specific content. In this example, we can thus see how ethnography of social media therefore does not set out to study how a particular platform is used, but rather, starts with the field site and studies the platforms that are used within the context of social relationships in that place. Social relationships also influence the relationship to social media platforms and ethnographic research can then show how a platform can be localised rather than 'exported'. Such an approach takes a greater interest in content than the platform itself and emphasises that the norms and values they reveal are neither uniform, nor universal.

Polymedia is a salient example of a theory of media that has been informed through the use of particular methods, illustrating how unique insight emerges from shifting the focus away from group or community formation, and instead towards specific practices or socialities. By considering the significance of liming and its inflections prior to the introduction of social media, Sinanan's case also confirms Coleman's assertion of the value of the process of ethnography for gaining detailed insights into the broader significance of digital media (2010). Coleman argues that the ethnographic enterprise significantly contributes to digital media studies, as ethnography involves different frames of analyses, drawing attention to history and local contexts and the lived experiences that result from such contexts (2010: 488-489). The more abstract points of polymedia therefore become particularly concrete in Sinanan's comparison between how particular relationships correlated to particular forms of platform use within the Trinidadian social context, something that could only have been elucidated through ethnography. Relationships of trust and ideally, long periods of immersion within people's everyday lives are beneficial for understanding uses of social media such as WhatsApp, which affords more dyadic communication between individuals and closed groups.

Social media and the ethnographic product

Throughout anthropology as a discipline, the relative weightings of three elements of ethnographic writing – ethnography, context and comparison – have shifted. Some of the earliest developments in ethnography came from Morgan (1851), who aimed to depict the structure of society from his research participants' viewpoints in his writing. This was later bolstered by deeper ethnographic engagement which followed as researchers started learning their informant's languages (for example, Cushing 1888 [1883], 1920). Boas' development of cultural anthropology in the US, guided by desires to 'salvage' cultures viewed under threat of disappearance, emphasised comparison over ethnographic description. Drastic reformulation accompanied Malinowski's (1922) work, which stressed active ethnographic engagement in participants' lives while also paying increased attention to the contextual element through charting linkages between supposedly separate domains, such as economics and magic. Evans-Pritchard's (1940) ethnography of *The Nuer* extended this by utilizing vivid ethnographic accounts, to the extent that his work remains widely influential in anthropology today.

Traditionally, ethnography within anthropology is most commonly described as participant observation, although where this takes place has increasingly come under question. For Geertz, ethnography defined anthropology in practice, saying that 'Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighbourhoods...); they study *in* villages' (1973: 22). Comaroff and Comaroff bring into question the production of place, the definition and boundaries of the field, as they argue the local and global are now inseparable (2003: 151). The question of what constitutes place is an issue brought into sharp focus as a result of social media's presence, as people use these platforms to maintain both localised and transnational family relationships and friendships, as well as potentially expanding their own networks. Indeed, with the ubiquity of social media, where media stories, news and images from popular culture are circulated by users at a frequency comparable to that of direct messages between individuals, what constitutes 'global' and 'local' is increasingly problematized. In the 1990s, anthropological debates were concerned with the influence of economic globalisation and transnational media flows on the apparent reduction of the 'local' (Marcus, 1995). Ethnographic studies carried out towards the end of the twentieth century sought to understand whether global influences were making societies more homogenous (Foster, 1991, 1999, Wilk, 1995).

The ubiquity of social media has increased concerns with cultural homogenisation , but ethnographic research provides substantial comparative evidence that different societies appropriate social media into localised social norms, uses, and meanings (Miller, 2011, Miller et al. 2016). Viewing social media through ethnography complements research which associates social media with individualism, self-expression and ego-centred networking (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). Ethnography highlights issues of culture while remaining sceptical of both cultural and technological determinism.

The small selection of pivotal ethnographic texts discussed above are foundational reading in anthropology, and have thus spawned a multitude of further ethnographic research and writings, all of which have had to negotiate and merge these issues of ethnography, comparison and contextualisation.

Downloadable digital ethnography

Despite the various reconfigurations of the internal balance of ethnographic writings over the decades, the forms of research products have largely remained constant: published ethnographic monographs and academic journal articles. While digital publishing, e-books and online journals have changed how many people access this literature, the intended audience often remains much the same. Although steps have been taken to remove financial and technical barriers to accessing these publications, such as the welcome growth of open access publications within anthropology (Weiss, 2014), anthropologists have primarily emphasized maintaining (or even extending) the rigour and high academic standards of peer-reviewed ethnographic publications (Miller 2012: 398), rather than enabling complimentary or alternative forms of scholarship.

The *Why We Post* project is attempting to challenge the 'traditional' ethnographic monograph as the main product of anthropological research. First, we committed to publish all of our monographs (Costa, 2016; Haynes, 2016; McDonald, 2016; Miller, 2016; Nicolescu, 2016; Sinanan, forthcoming; Spyer, forthcoming; Venkatraman, forthcoming; Wang, 2016) in an open access format through a leading academic publisher. This meant that they would be free to download by anyone in the world with an internet connection. Our own experience of conducting research in small towns in countries such as Brazil, India and China underlined the difficulties many have in accessing books and other educational resources.

However, our experiences showed us that simply providing access to the final ethnographic text was not enough. Merely being able to download a book free of charge does not

necessarily equate to people *wanting* to download it or subsequently read it. To address this, we realised that we also had to change the form of the ethnographic product. For example, although the finished volumes are scholarly academic texts, we adopted an accessible and open style of writing, so that they could be understood by the general public. We adopted a format that has more in common with historical writing than traditional anthropology, and decided to confine discussion of wider theory, academic issues and citations to the footnotes of each page. This means that reading the main body text provides the reader with a clear narrative of our findings, largely concentrating on the field site itself. For those who desire a more conventional academic book, the footnotes relate the evidence from each field site to the broader academic context and theoretical debates.

The methodological discussions around digital ethnography provide added insight into how digital ethnography, as a product, may be refined to reflect the actualities of people's everyday engagement with media forms. This methodological focus on what is taken for granted or perceived as normal in digital practices (Pink et al. 2016) necessitates an acknowledgement of the way that individuals perceive lived experience as entanglements, where aspects of life do not exist in separate categories (Ingold, 2008). Just as the *subjects* of ethnographies can no longer be caricatured as isolated social groups, those producing ethnography must also acknowledge that their *readers* (or audience) possess similarly complex and multivalent social lives. We argue, therefore, that any discussion of ethnography and social media must also rightfully consider the possibilities and challenges posed by new and alternative forms of ethnography such as open access publishing, filmmaking, and disseminating research findings and insights on social media platforms themselves.

Can a 'tweet' be ethnographic?

Above, we outlined a new format for ethnographic monographs that retains academic and theoretical rigour while focusing on specific results from a given field site. This is a small step towards making ethnographic research accessible to a larger audience. However, although this form emerged out of our ethnographic study of social media, it does not make use of social media itself.

Arguably, this is a key area in which social media and ethnography are converging. Social media itself is an increasingly acceptable outlet for ethnographic writing, and in turn, a new

ethnographic product. Researchers have shown willingness to use social media⁵ to promote their own work and engage in theoretical and disciplinary discussion (Price 2010). Anthropological organisations such as the *American Anthropological Association* and *Hau: The Journal of Anthropological Theory* are exemplary cases, with followers numbering in the tens of thousands. However perhaps more interesting is how individual researchers are using social media, and how these platforms are used to share ongoing ethnographic reflections and embryonic theoretical ideas over the course of fieldwork.

This use of social media as an ethnographic product has transformed the process of reviewing field notes from primarily internal and reflective to one that is potentially far more outwardly directed and collaborative in nature. Social media challenges the notion that there is such a thing as a 'final' ethnographic product. Instead, readers of a finished monograph may have followed the author's research project from afar for several years. Writing on the increasingly collaborative nature of the internet at the height of the 'Web 2.0' paradigm almost ten years ago, Bruns argued that "the role of the 'consumer' and even that of the 'end user' have long disappeared, and the distinctions between producers and users of content have faded into comparative insignificance" (Bruns, 2008: 2). While Bruns' argument can be critiqued by arguing that such collaborative, open-ended production by users is in fact symptomatic of exploitative relationships between users and platform owners, we find the concept remains useful in understanding how the role of the 'producer-ethnographer' and 'consumer-reader' may become increasingly muddled once the researcher starts sharing their research project on social media.

Ethnographic social media postings are often less polished and theoretical than peer-reviewed books and articles, but it is often the untreated nature of these online ethnographic field notes-cum-realizations that makes them especially compelling. As such, these forms of ethnographic product challenge the implicit contradiction between the supposedly 'thick' nature of ethnographic description (Geertz, 1973) and a persistent public discourse which maintains that online forms of communication are, by nature, lacking in profundity and meaning.

A decade ago, Jenkins argued that "convergence requires media companies to rethink assumptions about what it means to consume media, assumptions that shape both programming and marketing decisions" (2006: 18). The same is true for ethnographers. The authors have directly experienced the benefits of using social media as an ethnographic

⁵ Blogs have been included in this definition because of their 'social' commenting feature, but also because they frequently draw on online work.

product through a website, blog and social media profiles which were set up and maintained throughout their project. Social media postings related to the on-going fieldwork added a reflexive, open aspect to the research process, and resulted in interest and feedback from fellow researchers and the wider public. Our blog resulted in invitations to present at conferences and workshops, to contribute articles regarding research to other outlets, among other benefits.

The ethnographic slant of our own research was complemented by a strong emphasis on social media's materiality – the physical nature of these platforms and their content, understood within the context of their social use. For instance, we paid careful attention to the increasingly visual nature of social media in each of our field sites. Our project dedicated an entire month solely to the study of our participants' social media profiles, systematically counting, analysing and categorising their postings (including status updates, shared images and video) across a range of platforms (including Facebook, Twitter, QQ and WeChat, depending on what was used by participants in each site). Although this approach may appear to represent something of a departure from the 'active engagement' in our participants' everyday lives which ethnographic practice is supposed to typify, the majority of our researchers balanced this by remaining in the field site for the entire month in which they carried out this screen-based analysis. This meant that even during this period it was inevitable that we as researchers would encounter in social settings the very participants whose profile we had been closely analysing the social media updates of, affording valuable opportunity to obtain narrative accounts of the context in which such postings had been made.

The result of this approach became clear in the case of baby photographs observed on social media in McDonald's fieldsite. As McDonald systematically analysed the QQ (a popular social media platform in China) postings – a total of 1214 postings from 55 participants – he gradually became aware of the prevalence of photos of participants' young children, especially babies, shared on their QQ profiles. Before his systematic analysis was even complete, he began taking time in the evening to talk to parents of these children about their rationale and motive for posting so many baby photos. McDonald was able to identify two distinct periods in the production of these baby photos: the first, self-produced photos that are taken by mothers and posted on social media to alleviate the boredom of the traditional 'sitting the month' period, where mothers are confined to the home with their newborn child; the second, a series of professionally produced baby photos that are taken when the child reaches 100 days of age, and are then subsequently made into both a printed photo album and shared on social media.

Far from just considering these photos, their circulation online, and the subsequent implications of their sharing, being situated in the field site allowed him to examine how social media was changing the production of these images. McDonald spoke to the managers of several of the town's photo studios who specialised in offering this service, and started to understand that parents were so keen to upload the resultant hundred-day baby photos that photo studios were offering the uploading service within the studio itself, immediately after the initial photographs were taken. Furthermore, conversations with photo studio managers enabled him to understand how sharing these images on QQ represented the latest stage in the development of this photographic tradition, which had transformed over several decades following the introduction of photography in the town, and was also built upon a longer established tradition of banquets and gifting red envelopes filled with money to celebrate a child reaching his or her hundredth day.

In addition to charting the practice's historical roots, this focus on the social context of these images as material artefacts allowed for an understanding of how they related to conceptions of the future. Many "successful" photo albums included photographs with a wide variety of different poses, facial expressions, outfits and props. Parents and photo studio managers explained that this variety was seen to reflect abundance and wealth and a desire to avoid monotony. This stood in contrast to baby photographs in the town taken in the 1970s, where most families were able to afford only a single black-and-white photograph. The increasing variety and complexity of photographic images reflected not only a desire to express their current wealth, but also an aspiration to bestow a certain material abundance upon their children. The images were also intended to serve as a record of parents' generosity toward their offspring at an early age, to be reviewed by these children when they reached adulthood, and contributing to informing traditional Chinese notions of parent-child reciprocity (see Stafford, 2000).

Despite being a single example, the case of baby photos shared on social media in China does demonstrate how a specific focus on the material content of postings, and systematic analysis thereof in light of their associated social context, can highlight seemingly mundane aspects of social media (that nonetheless tend to dominate participants' online activities), which, when subsequently combined with focused ethnographic research, illuminate the far-reaching effects of these practices: how they relate and contribute to the historical, economic, consumptive and material changes of people's lives. In this case, social media ethnography has to make sense of particular actions around social media within a much broader context of ongoing social transformation and how this interacts with people's own memories, concerns, morality, desires and aspirations.

However, this case gives us more than simply ethnographic insight. The posting studied in the course of the visual analysis are more than just objects to think with. They have also formed an integral part of the ethnographic findings of this project. The images that parents have shared online are reproduced (with their consent) in McDonald's (2016) monograph. With the help of a filmmaker, McDonald produced a short documentary film about the photographic practice of taking photos to celebrate a baby reaching a hundred days, which included an interview with a photo studio owner and a parent, as well as examples of these postings shared online. The resultant film⁶ is shared on the project's YouTube channel⁷, along with others from his field site. The implications of these baby photos were also discussed in the project's blog.⁸ Although the traditions of using imagery to complement text in monographs, and the wider sub discipline of visual anthropology are now well established, these kinds of social media postings and imagery provide a new feeling of presence in the field. They not only have an 'authenticating' quality, confirming to the audience that what is being spoken about actually exists, but they also invite viewers take part in a deeper, critical engagement with these reproduced artefacts, critically assessing the author's explanation of the item against their original account.

The case of baby photos on Chinese social media is perhaps most surprising because it demonstrates the new circularity that social media has brought to the ethnographic form. Photographs that were originally produced with the intention of being shared on social media are subsequently analysed in an attempt to understand *how* people use social media, and in addition to appearing in an ethnographic monograph, they subsequently become the subject of a documentary film which is shared and commented on upon social media. As the written ethnographic monograph becomes increasingly embedded in an environment of 'media convergence' (2006) it is inevitable that the ethnographic 'product' will take on new and challenging forms.

Conclusion: What does social media mean for ethnography?

Throughout this chapter we have seen how the ethnographic process and product are affected by the presence of social media. As social media become increasingly entangled in the daily lives of research participants, they become a mode through which many foundational themes in anthropology can be examined. This shift speaks to a broader

⁶ <http://youtu.be/BQE1m1DQk8>

⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/whywepost>

⁸ <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/global-social-media/2013/11/19/qq-and-nationalism-is-qq-uniting-the-many-different-chinas/>

change of methodological focus in relation to studies of social media, moving from studies of community formation to more 'action' based analysis detailing how sociality, practice and mobility are being reshaped by social media. Polymedia, for example, emerged from modes of analysis which concentrated on the sociality associated with different platforms, and different practices of social media use.

In the second part of this chapter, we examined the changing nature of the ethnographic product, showing how social media has contributed to the latest phase in over a century's worth of shifting in the actual form of ethnographic product. We argued for acknowledgement of social media *itself* as a venue for a new type of ethnographic output, detailing how social media became an important venue for sharing our ethnographic experience and knowledge. To illustrate this, we turned to the example of Chinese baby photos, which highlighted the circularity of social media postings that were at once the focus of ethnographic inquiry, but which subsequently appeared as part of our ethnographic product in monographs and articles, but also on social media itself in the form of blog posts, YouTube videos and social media posts.

Ingold (2014) has recently highlighted the increasingly widespread use of the term ethnography – both within anthropology and its allied disciplines – claiming that the term has become so common that it has lost much of its meaning. He argues our understanding of what constitutes ethnography ought to be confined to (largely written) attempts to 'chronicle the life and times of a people' (2014:384). Ingold asserts that encounters with people, field work, methods, and the knowledge emerging from these activities all should *not* be regarded as ethnographic. Instead, he argues that many of these activities should simply be routinely referred to as participant observation. He stresses participant observation involves the exploration of the human condition, rather than describing people's points of view or life world, and the *possibilities* of being human.

Ingold's positioning of anthropology – rather than ethnography – as a 'practice' or a type of exposure, and an exploration of humanness, is certainly an appealing one. We also sympathise with his concerns regarding the widespread appropriation of the use of the term ethnography both within anthropology and elsewhere, ourselves noting that such use is extending to many settings outside academia, including by corporations in commercial settings (for example Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003; Thrift, 2006: 295).

We argue that anthropology's preservation is more likely to come from embracing, rather than resisting the expansive nature of ethnography. This has been made especially clear through this chapter's examination of the relationship between ethnography and social

media. The ubiquitous nature of social media means that it will be an essential tool for fieldworkers in nearly every environment regardless of their research site or theme. Social media and ethnography are already deeply embedded in one another, and will only become more so in the future. This process is not expected to be an easy one, as many of the changes that would be brought upon both the ethnographic process and product pose fundamental challenges to the way in which knowledge is constructed, the authority of the anthropologist, and the state of relations between the ethnographer, participants and readers. However, it is precisely for this reason, that rising to the challenge of a new social-media oriented ethnography has the potential to reinvigorate social science research more broadly, bringing it closer to the people they study both in the course of fieldwork and in the production and dissemination of knowledge.

References

- Acquisti, A. and Gross, R. 2006. "Imagined communities: Awareness, information sharing, and privacy on the Facebook." *Privacy enhancing technologies*. Springer: Berlin Heidelberg.
- Boellstorff, T. 2008. *Coming of Age in Second Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Baym, N. K. 1994. From practice to culture on Usenet. *The Sociological Review*. 42(S1). pp. 29–52.
- boyd, d. 2014. *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.
- Bruns, A. 2008. *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second life, and Beyond: from production to produsage*. New York; Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Burrell, J. 2012. *Invisible users: youth in the Internet cafes of urban Ghana*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Burton, R. 1997. *Afro-Creole: Power, opposition and play in the Caribbean*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Carpenter, Christopher J. 2012. "Narcissism on Facebook: Self-promotional and anti-social behavior." *Personality and individual differences*. 52(4): pp. 482–486.
- Chambers, D. 2013. *Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Clifford, J. and Marcus, G. E. (eds.) .1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Coleman, E. G. 2010. 'Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media.' *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 39: 487–505.
- Coleman, E. G. 2012. *Coding freedom : the ethics and aesthetics of hacking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Comaroff, J., and Comaroff, J. 2003. "Ethnography on an awkward scale Postcolonial anthropology and the violence of abstraction". *Ethnography*, 4(2), pp. 147-179.
- Costa, E. 2016. *Social media in South East Turkey*. London: UCL Press.
- Cushing, F.H. (1988 [1883]) *Zuni Fetishes*, Las Vegas: KC Publications.
- Dwyer, C., Starr, H. and Passerini, K. 2007. "Trust and privacy concern within social networking sites: A comparison of Facebook and MySpace." *AMCIS 2007 Proceedings*. 339.
- Elliott, R. and Jankel-Elliott, N. 2003. "Using ethnography in strategic consumer research". *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 6(4), pp. 215–223.
- Eriksen, T. H. 1990. "Liming in Trinidad: the art of doing nothing." *Folk*, 32 (1), pp. 23-43.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. (1940) *The Nuer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foster, R. J. 1991. "Making national cultures in the global ecumene." *Annual review of anthropology*, 20, pp. 235–260.
- Foster, R. J. 1999. "Melanesianist anthropology in the era of globalization." *The Contemporary Pacific*, pp.140–159.
- Fuller, M. 2005. *Media ecologies: materialist energies in art and technoculture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Geertz, C. 1973. *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays* (Vol. 5019). New York: Basic Books.
- Gershon, I. 2010 *The Break-Up 2.0: Disconnecting Over New Media*. Cornell: Cornell

- University Press.
- Ginsburg, F. 2012. "Disability in the Digital Age". In H. A. Horst & D. Miller (Eds.), *Digital Anthropology*. Oxford: Berg. pp. 101–126.
- Haynes, N. (2016). *Social Media in Northern Chile*. London: UCL Press.
- Haythornthwaite, C. and Wellman, B. (1998), Work, friendship, and media use for information exchange in a networked organization. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 49: 1101–1114.
- Hine, C. M. (2000). *Virtual Ethnography*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Hine, C. (2015). *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Horst, H., Martinez, K. and Sima, C. 2010. "Chapter 4: Families", in Ito, M. (ed.) *Hanging Out, Messing Around and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Horst, H. A. 2009. "Aesthetics of the Self: Digital Mediations". In D. Miller (Ed.), *Anthropology and the individual: a material culture perspective*. Oxford: Berg. pp. 99–113.
- Ingold, T. 2008. "Bindings against boundaries: entanglements of life in an open world." *Environment and planning*. 40(8). pp. 1796-1810.
- Ingold, T. 2014. "That's enough about ethnography!" *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 4(1), pp. 383–395.
- Ito, M. ed. 2010. *Hanging out, messing around, and geeking out: kids living and learning with new media*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Jenkins, R. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Junco, R. 2012. "The relationship between frequency of Facebook use, participation in Facebook activities, and student engagement." *Computers & Education*. 58.(1), pp. 162–171.
- Kelty, C. M. 2008. *Two bits : the cultural significance of free software*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kiesler, S. and L. S. Sproull .1986. "Response Effects in the Electronic Survey", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 50(3), pp.402-13.
- Lieber, M., 1976. "Liming" and Other Concerns: The Style of Street Embedments in Port-Of-Spain, Trinidad. *Urban anthropology*, pp.319-334.
- Madianou, M. 2015. "Polymedia and Ethnography: Understanding the Social in Social Media". *Social Media+ Society*, 1(1), 2056305115578675.
- Madianou, M. & Miller, D. 2012. *Migration and New Media: Transnational Families and Polymedia*. London: Routledge.
- Madianou, M. & Miller, D. 2013. "Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication". *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16(2), pp. 169-187.
- Malinowski, B. 1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, New York: Dutton.
- Marcus, G. E. 1995. "Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography". *Annual review of anthropology*, pp. 95-117.
- McDonald, T. 2016. *Social Media in Rural China*. London: UCL Press.
- Miller, D. 2016. *Social Media in an English Village*. London: UCL Press.
- Miller, D. 2011. *Tales from Facebook*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Miller, D. 1994a. *Modernity: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.

- Miller, D. 1994b. Style and Ontology. In: Firedman, J (Ed.) *Consumption and Identity*. Chur, Reading: Harwood Academic Publishers pp. 53-70.
- Miller, D., Costa, E. Haynes, N., McDonald, T., Nicolescu, R., Sinanan, J., Spyer, J., Venkatraman, S and Wang,, X. 2016. *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press.
- Miller, D. and Sinanan, J. 2014. *Webcam*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Miller, D., and Slater, D. 2000. *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.
- Nicolescu, R. 2016. *Social Media in Southeast Italy*. London: UCL Press.
- Pink, S. Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T. and Tacchi, J. 2016. *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*, London: Sage.
- Postill, J. 2008. "Localizing the internet beyond communities and networks". *New Media & Society New Media & Society*, 10(3), pp. 413-431.
- Postill, J. and Pink, S. 2012. "Social media ethnography: The digital researcher in a messy web." *Media International Australia*, 145, pp. 23–134.
- Postill, J. 2013. "Democracy in an age of viral reality: A media epidemiography of Spain's indignados movement." *Ethnography*, 0 (00), pp. 1-19.
- Price, D. H. (2010) "Blogging Anthropology: Savage Minds, Zero Anthropology, and AAA Blogs". *American Anthropologist*. 112 (1). 140-142.
- Rainie, L. & Wellman, B. 2012. *Networked: the new social operating system*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sanjek, R. 2010. "Ethnography". In A. Barnard & J. Spencer (Eds.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (2nd Edition). Abingdon: Routledge. pp. 243–249.
- Sinanan, J. (forthcoming). *Social Media in Trinidad*. London: UCL Press.
- Slater, D. And Tacchi, J. 2004. "Research on ICT innovations for poverty reduction", Paris: UNESCO.
- Spyer, J. (forthcoming). *Social Media in Emergent Brazil*. London: UCL Press.
- Stafford, C. 2000. Chinese patriliney and the cycles of yang and laiwan. In J. Carsten (Ed.), *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 37-54.
- Thrift, N. 2006. Re-inventing invention: new tendencies in capitalist commodification. *Economy and Society*, 35(2), pp. 279–306.
- Tufekci, Z. and Wilson, C. 2012. "Social media and the decision to participate in political protest: Observation from Tahrir Square." *Journal of Communication* 62(2);, pp. 363–79.
- Wang, X. 2016. *Social Media in Industrial China*. London. University College London Press
- Weiss, B. 2014. "Opening Access: Publics, Publication, and a Path to Inclusion". *Cultural Anthropology*, 29(1), pp. 1–2.
- Wilk, R. 1995. "Learning to be local in Belize: global systems of common difference." *Worlds apart: Modernity through the prism of the local*. pp. 110–33.
- Venkatraman, S. (forthcoming). *Social Media in South India*. London: UCL Press.